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GHERASIM LUCA'S SHORT PROSE: THE OBJECTS OF PREY (FIRST CHAPTER)

ABSTRACT

The paper continues "object-oriented" analysis of the most inspiring experiments in the Romanian Surrealism's repertoire, notably in the short stories by Gherasim Luca, one of the movement's leading representatives. His two books of poetic prose, published originally in the 1940s, could be interpreted as the emblematic example of Surrealist revolutionary tendencies in the field of new materialism. Such texts as *The Kleptobject Sleeps* or *The Rubber Coffee* become the laboratory of the object itself, gaining a new, unlimited identity in the platform of Surreality, where the human-like subject loses its status. Objects possess quasi-occult powers to initiate and control human's desires. Therefore, Breton's "revolution of the object" could concretize as literary *praxis* showing the way how contemporary "materialist turn" in anthropology deals with avant-garde theories.

KEYWORDS: avant-garde, experimental prose, Surrealism, Gherasim Luca, Romanian literature.

If we consider *Passive Vampire* (1945), which tends to be the highlight of Gherasim Luca's Surrealist oeuvre, a textbook for learning the non-Oedipal world, his short stories written between 1940 and 1945 (18 texts of varied length collected in two books) would be a sort of an accompanying exercise book. While *Vampire*'s aim is to show the totality of the author's literary and philosophical endeavor, the oneiric stories are focused on a multitude of reading practices, sharing the spirit of negation of Luca's subversive philosophical ideas. They oscillate between the classical Surrealist theory of liberation of man, the anti-rationalist conventions of bourgeois love that binds him, and the mythology of suicidal death as a portal to a new reality in which one can live repeatedly as a recontextualized subject without any limitations. A subject, let us add, fighting for its autonomy with animate objects and predatory automata.

When analyzing Gherasim Luca's short stories from his Surrealist period, it is not easy to separate their theoretical background from the author's creative *praxis*. Reflections on the categories of object and subject seem to be adjacent to the manifestations of artistic disinvoltage present in the texts; it could be said that is inextricably intertwined with them. Therefore it seems that the decision to separate these two layers, if only for purely research purposes, would have no clear justification. Most of Luca's works from the Surrealist period, published between 1942–1947, in the genological point of view could be classified as fragmentary poetic prose or, slightly more elaborate, prose poems with elements of the manifesto or programatic essay (the strength of the text is determined by

the negotiations between the elements of fictional and non-fictional). The most important prose works of Luca written in Romanian are two collections of short stories: *Un lup văzut printr-o lupă* [*The Praying Mantis Appraised*; 1942] and *Inventatorul iubirii* [*The Inventor of Love*; 1945]. Moreover, it should be noted that *Le Vampire passif* [*The Passive Vampire*; 1945], written and published in French, has also a Romanian variant discovered few years ago (see Tzone 2016: 13–32). All the texts largely focus on the issue of Surrealist object seen in the post-revolutionary perspective as gaining a new, unlimited identity in the platform of Surreality, where the human-like subject loses its status (see Breton's *Surrealist Situation of the Object*, Breton 1972c: 255–278).

The major "objectual" concept by Gherasim Luca is undoubtedly the idea of "Objectively Offered Object" ("O.O.O."), developed in the introductory, quasi-essayistic part of *The Passive Vampire*, but also several other ideas oscillating between anthropology, sociology of things and occult practices should be mentioned as important factors of Luca's prose (see Kornhauser 2015: 188–198). All these concepts are combined by the desire to break the relationship of "external" versus "internal" and to overcome – with a revolutionary rashness, so to speak – the complexes that prevent man from gaining freedom "in all its forms" as Breton would write in his first *Manifesto of Surrealism* from 1924 (see Breton 1972a: 3–6). Of course, the Oedipus complex is the innermost of all, and, according to Luca's doctrine, contains all others and is particularly conducive to the subject's enslavement. Hence the common denominator of the objects created and described by Luca: the dialectical, revolutionary "non-Oedipal" character expressed in destroying habits and initiating new interpersonal and interobjectual relations.

These uncanny recordings of the struggle – contradictory, but at the same time convincing in the terms of literary work – to free oneself from the guardianship of *raison* fit easily in the Surrealist doctrine. Gherasim Luca was inspired by his contact with the Parisian Surrealists betwen 1938 and 1940. The young artist, who had tried some juvenile literary "pranks" in the anarchist-like Bucharest magazine *Alge* and a dozen ofpoems published in the press, was warmly welcomed in Paris by the group gathered around André Breton, supported by friends from Bucharest – poet and writer Gellu Naum and painter Victor Brauner. Shortly he became fascinated by the occultism promoted by Brauner and studied a number of writings from the history of alchemy and demonism (see Morar 2003: 166; Pop 2004: 21). He shared the Surrealists' interest in quasi-human objects (dolls, mannequins) and not-fully-humans-though-yet-humans (doubles, incarnations, media, demons, living corpses), which evoked both thanatological and erotic images.

After their reluctant return from Paris to Bucharest, Naum and Luca continued this vision by establishing, together with Paul Păun, Dolfi Trost and Virgil Teodorescu, the Romanian Surrealist Group, which operated between the years 1940–1947. As Petre Răileanu states, the Groups's "postulates can be summarized in the following points: rehabilitation of sleep, along with granting it the status of an objective reality, exposing the explicit content of dreams (...), complete release of desires considered as a specific code to the human personality" (Răileanu 2004: 33–37). Luca was the author and co-author of numerous manifestos of RSG, including the famous *Dialectics of Dialectics*, where he expressed his predilection to combine philosophical considerations (including those on dialectical materialism and the psychoanalytic foundation of Surrealist doctrine) with an unmistakable literary neatness (see Luca, Trost 2001: 36–39). It was during this very period, when he published two collections of short prose, written almost synchronically in Romanian and French – the hallmark of the Surrealist era of his writing.

The Romanian Surrealist Group, soon after a moment of increased activity just after the war, broke up as a result of Communist repressions. Luca emigrated via Israel to Paris, where he settled in the early 1950s, writing only in French since then. He renounced his Romanian identity, changing the spelling of his name from Gherasim to Ghérasim. Although, we should remember, his real name was Salman Locker, he had Jewish roots. The assumed name belonged to an Orthodox monk, whose obituary notice he had once observed on the street while walking. The very decision to abandon the name and his ties to the homeland is easy to understand in the context of the anti-Semitic campaign in pre-war Romania, which also affected other RSG writers of Jewish origin – Paul Păun and Dolfi Trost, who immigrated to Israel after 1947.

Luca described himself as a stateless person all his life (he coined the phrase *étranjuif* – "foreigner/Jewish"). His self-identification was helped by his bilingualism, which in fact seemed to be quadrilingualism (he spoke fluent Romanian, French, German and Yiddish). He continued his literary career in Paris, but shifted the area of his artistic interests towards hermetic poetry, imbued with philosophical ideas and linguistic experiments. His extremely pessimistic, even nihilistic attitude to life, which manifested itself – as was already visible in *Dead Death* ("everything directs me towards a near-logical conclusion of my negation"; Luca 2009b: 49) – by the motifs of suicide, self-mutilation, self-destruction and tragic love, also came to the fore in this period of his literary life. He published many volumes, some of them well received by French critics, such as *Héros-Limite* (1953), *La Chant de la Carpe* (1973), *Paralipomènes* (1977), and *Théâtre de Bouche* (1984) and appeared with poetic performances, during which he recited his texts in an expressive way that gained the critics' attention. He also devoted himself to visual arts: from the 1960s displayed his collages and graphics inspired by the works of Hans Arp and Max Ernst. At the age of eighty, after being illegally evicted from his apartment at Montmartre, he committed suicide by jumping into the Seine, repeating the gesture of his friend Paul Celan, another stateless poet with Jewish Romanian origin living in Paris (see Răileanu 2005: 89).

Luca' suicide resonates with a "virtual suicide", a term – and an act repeated by the narrator of his prose – on every occasion like an ominous mantra (for instance in *The Inventor of Love*; Luca 2009c: 17). Of course, it would give his weary consciousness a breath of new existence, replacing the Oedipal stigma of being on earth with an eternal entity, fully independent and immune to the mischief of traumatic impulses. It should be noted that the Surrealist doctrine, which equates dream and reality on the ontological level, in this case was not that radical. Suicide was considered as a last resort, as it meant an escape from responsibility for introducing a new order. Instead of Artaud-like self-aggression, violence against others was proposed – analogically to André Breton, who in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* from 1930 called for shooting passers-by with a revolver (Breton 1972b: 137). These sadistic tendencies of French Surrealists are also visible in Luca's prose, especially in the numerous passages in which the narrator takes on long orations aimed at humanity – compromised and spoiled by boredom and conformism. Nevertheless, the narrator has an equal, or even greater, predilection for masochistic practices. They become an ambiguous platform for the liberation of mind and body, a catalyst for the "variety of immediate solutions" mentioned in *The Inventor of Love*, one of Luca's masterpieces of short form (Luca 2009c: 22).

Obviously, in *The Inventor of Love*, just like in *Vampire*, delirious considerations and desires for "pollution nights" (Luca 2009c: 26) are analogically intertwined with auto-

biographical details – bisexual fascinations, afterimages of occult practices, and, above all, dealing with actual suicide attempts. In *The Dead Death*, this nearly-suicidal narrator strives for death seen as the negation of everyday life ("my real enemy, my quotidian, insupportable, inadmissible, unintelligible enemy"; Luca 2009b: 43). From this – on the one hand nihilistic, on the other hand oneiric ("the passion for the dissapearance" is here one of the driving forces; Luca 2009b: 52) – point of view the final hour becomes the starting point of a new life, autonomous and free of Oedipal sediments. Perhaps it is this ability to fictionalize one's own experiences that determines the power of imaging that sparkles within Luca's prose.

Recalling the patrons of his writing and psychic experiments – innovators, alchemists, inventors such as Heron of Alexandria, Roger Bacon or Johann van Helmont, Surrealist painters inspired by sexuality, such as Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy or Wolfgang Paalen, tyrants and radicals from the factual and fictional past, Julius Caesar, Jean Valjean or Cain, and of course de Sade, the patron of all lewdness and irrationality – Luca outlines the horizon of his literary search between the traumatic images of daily routine (marked by the stamp of the unescapable suicide) and visions of "the external world with hallucinatory forms" (*The Next Day*; Luca 2009e: 122). On the one hand, it is a fascination with non-human beings, whose unpredictability awakens the lustful glances of every restless spirit, on the other hand – visions of immeasurable freedom, based on post-Euclidean geometry and unfettered by the censorship of the Superego.

Coming back to short stories themselves: first of all, we should underline that the characteristic sequences of repetitions, reminiscent of mystical incantations, bring to life mediumic "kleptobjects" with an ambiguous identity. "A canoe made of hair, with soft paddles, gelatinous, like sea animals" (*The Volcanoes Inside Vegetables*; Luca 2009h: 76), "a sofa upon which rots a bed" (*I Love You*; Luca 2009a: 96), "round horses [that] glide from one sidewalk to another" (*The Kleptobject Sleeps*; Luca 2009d: 128) and a "vitreous thigh of suicide" (*The Next Day*; Luca 2009e: 119) reveal their predatory intentions, provoking symptoms of persecution mania (like in the mentioned earlier *The Dead Death*) in the narrator. The Surrealist motto – convulsiveness of gestures (see, for instance, Breton 1972a: 125) – does not leave the narrator, becoming the only certainty in the world that is hostile, ruled by magical, inhuman forces. Nevertheless, it supports some of the subject's basic desires – about having an ideal lover and a coherent, trustworthy identity, about the revalorization of bonds and social institutions, about exceeding the rigors of alienation. Phantasms are embedded in an empirical base, peregrinations through the recesses of "undomesticated regions, virgin, demented" (*The Rubber Coffee*; Luca 2009g: 111) are juxtaposed with the image of a daily stroll, and abstract considerations are accompanied by material equivalents: an orange could be a specific symbol of the ego (head, skull, brain) and of the reality (the world, the globe) – an orange next to which there must lie a sharpened knife, like in *The Praying Mantis Appraised*: "(…) a spontaneous reversal occurs, long yearned for, between the contents of this orange and my own cranial crate" (Luca 2019f: 73).

These "kleptobjects" turn into autonomous agents that would gain control over the transoformed reality, and, in the same time, they reduce the human to a passive observer who lacks his agency (just as the figure of passive vampire sucks milk instead of blood is the figure of impotence; Fijałkowski 2008: 20). They also seem to be a projection of quasi-sexual fantasy: for instance, the narrator of *The Kleptobject Sleeps* is possessed by

the libidinal force of stealing some of the objects that surround him in order to regaining the dominant position of both sexual and non-sexual agent:

> (…) the lover's lips from which I steal the kiss, the kleptokiss, I steal in succession a bracelet, a photograph, a ribbon, an hour, and I commit s omany rapes, set so many fires, the kleptobracelet I put on in the evening in my room is more certain than a gender, the kleptopotograph more alive than the model, the ribbon is a new position for lovemaking (Luca 2009d: 131).

According to the klepto-rule – which obviously refers to the "Objectively Offered Object" theory – these stealed items could evoke magic aura that would help to improve the ontological status of the stealer – at least as a person who is impowered by the magic forces: "the kleptobject offers the possibility of false external values with real internal necessities" (Luca 2009d: 132), seeminigly as in Breton's vision of a new, recontextualised object ready to transform the surrounding space by restoring the primal instincts of free and unbounded love (see Breton 1972c: 273–274). Still, this kind of relationship has also its darker sides. As we mentioned above, the object are predatory and they do not forgive any betrayal. In fact, their bloodthirstiness makes them similar to vampires – of course, the active ones – lurking on the victim, like in *I Love You's* oneiric-driven stream of (un)consciousness, where the male narrator-protagonist is obsessesed with the visions of female-like objects that seeks for his body and soul: "these brides, disheveled objects, carnivore, sanguine, the magic objects that surround me and divulge their secrets one by one" (Luca 2009a: 97).

Critics find in Luca's prose a fascination with alchemical theories (the world as an *athanor*, furnace for the production of philosopher's stone), Satanism (invoking the names of the Prince of Darkness and a reflex of repulsion towards Paradise and its metaphors), libertinism (visions of misanthropic and sadomasochistic sexuality, often directed at the weaker and defenseless – women or children). It is true that those strongly provocative images can be found in several texts, notably in sadistic practices shown in *The Volcanoes Inside Vegetables*, where "satanic consistency of a Marquis de Sade" allows the narrator to "transcend any previous commonplace state" (Luca 2009h: 77–78). For sure it would be a mistake, however, to accuse the author of adoring the most common tastes and proclaiming an apology of evil. Criticism – whether present in texts directly, or resulting from their general attitude – concerns bourgeois vices and limitations that inhibit the work of the imagination and the evolution of art. In this vision, static and out-of-date icons must give way to the unfettered imagination that drives the exploration of non-oedipal space. The subject has to face the real Real here, which – as we know otherwise – is more terrible and more revolutionary than any imaginative (Foster 1996: 174). Luca, like other Surrealists, had to negotiate between the Surreal (meant as a platform separating the conscious and the unconscious) and the Real that tends to provoke its transformation into a new reality of "dreams and vice" where the "rendezvous of objects" (Luca 2009a: 96) takes place endlessly.

The non-Oedipal vision that inspired Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to create their own *Anti-Oedipus* is mainly based on the belief that a dream is not (as Freud and post-Freudists wanted), fused with the memory of hidden content, but a subversive reality of explicit substance, related in the first place to madness and magic. The revolutionary nature of Luca's thinking and writing lies precisely in the belief that a phantasmatic dream (and the text that corresponds to it) does not refer to some actual trauma, but constitutes a traumatic reality in itself (see Deleuze, Guattari 1977: 473). Furthermore,

it can be said that the process of interpreting this vision should not substitute the solid analysis of its properties and structure in the close reading manner of the New Criticism. Above all, Luca's prose should be read as a neverending adventure of language – at times, it would seem, ruled by the movement of chance, yet precise, and utilizing metaphors for something that can be seen as hideous from the conservative – in literary and ideological terms – point of view. It is worth emphasizing that this very language that defies cause and effect logic provokes a magmatic structure's lunatic flow and at the same time provides bright creation, with an easy word-formation arsenal. After all, who would not want to have the impression that [her/his]

> (...) ear is glued to the floor in order for me to listen to the horse-roof clatter of the bricks, perhaps I have not left home yet, perhaps I have not left my childhood yet, perhaps I am galloping across the field on my wooden horse, nostrils scattered by sabers crossing in the wind, lips unraveled by feverish murmurs, teeth narcissistically thrust into my own tongue, while in my bed, disheveled by passions comb and hair pair scandalously like two snakes (*I Love You*; Luca 2009a: 99–100).

Indeed, while the majority of Luca's writings problematize the category of the object and report on its endless evolution into a predatory agent, in several passages this half-oneiric, half-grotesque prose changes its feisty, bizarre tone to lighter tints. For instance, *The Inventor of Love* could be read as a complaint about impossible love, full of anger and inner fervor. The narrator seeks "an unborn woman of [his] heart" (Luca 2019c: 24), because only upon her "angelic flesh" he can "endlessly project convultions, fury, unceasing, terrible passion for sacrilege" (Luca 2019c: 23). "Luca unexpectedly gives priority" Răileanu writes, "to love-passion, love-madness, love-fetish, love explored in its deepest and most secret regions (...). The final acord is the absolute of love" (Răileanu 2004: 34). Moving between the poetics of the hymn and the enchantment characteristic of black magic, the narrator-protagonist, previously involved in the production of objects and observing their development into autonomous entities, loses sight of this fetish in favor of another: a living woman, who turns out to be as imperceptible as animated objects who control human gestures, feelings and actions. Desires, previously enchanted in objects, try to free themselves in the process of giving and influence the submission of the mysterious female lover. But these pacts with demons are useless. Even evil powers and the lascivious activity of things are not able to humanize the object of desire. The phantom of a beloved woman incarnating the desire that cannot find a solution is the punishment incurred for negotiating with objects, equipping them with totemic powers.

The constant negotiation of statuses in the relationship between objects endowed with demonic power and a dysfunctional subject ("I myself am a rag among these objects of flesh", whispers *I Love You's* narrator; Luca 2009a: 96) must inevitably lead to defeat. In Luca's short stories, as well as in *The Passive Vampire*, failure has many faces – from losing control of the creative process, through physical degradation to a conflict with one's ego. The most important, however, is the defeat in confrontation with one's own desires, which in the new reality – or rather in the remains of reality after the return of the Real (Foster claims the return would also change one's attitude towards the object of desire; see Foster 1996: 182; Deleuze, Guattari 1977: 474–479) – become autonomous and do not belong to any anthropocentric order. In this sense, the narrator becomes a victim of his own trick. Wishing to win the favors of the secret forces and provide his desire an accurate libidinal cast – with his "invented love, paradisiacal projection of the infernal

brain" (*The Inventor of Love*; Luca 2009c: 23), treated here as an unattainable model of femininity – he loses the opportunity to shape his own destiny. Transferring the powers of attraction and enchantment of the "unborn lover" onto newly-independent objects, the narrator plunges into masturbatory visions as if into a dreamlike Surreality.

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